

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

3. Astral Sea

Tsedaye Makonnen

My light sculptures and mirror textiles are an extension of my work on transhistorical forced migration of Black communities across the globe. The light sculptures consist of a large-scale installation made up of light towers that are described as obelisks (an ode to Ethiopia's *Axum*, created during the 4th century CE), monuments and totems. Each tower is formed of lightboxes stacked on top of one another, with each lightbox being named after a self-identifying Black woman or girl who has died from state-sanctioned violence in the US or while migrating to Europe from East Africa across the Mediterranean. Each lightbox is inscribed with Ethiopian/Eritrean Coptic crosses that are derived from pre-Christian symbols indigenous to that region. Accompanying the light sculptures is a guide that lists all of the womxn's names assigned to them, as well as the meanings of their names, the date and their age when they died. The most recent light installation is named after Senait and Nahom Tadesse (whose names mean "Peacemaker" and "Comforter"), a nineteen-year-old Eritrean mother and her six-month-old child who died in a German detention center in 2018, in events reminiscent of the 1856 story of Black American mother Margaret Garner. Another lightbox is dedicated to Miriam Carey, an unarmored thirty-four-year-old Black mother who was brutally murdered by US Capitol Police in Washington, D.C. in 2013 in front of her one-year-old baby, and whose name means "Sea of Sorrow", "Rebellion", "Wished-for Child", or "Mistress of the Sea".

The *Astral Sea* textile works are adorned with hundreds of mirror pieces laser cut from the East African Coptic cross designs from my light sculptures. These reflective pieces are "the negative space of the sculptures", encoded with messages of protection and healing.

The abstract designs I intuitively compose on the fabrics are inspired by various Black symbols that have themselves migrated across bodies of water and borders, i.e. Kongolese Cosmograms, Haitian Veves and emblems of other African spiritualities and cosmologies. The fabrics represent water and the mirrored patterns memorialize bodies that have drowned. Wearing these works in performance spiritually activates them, embodying and evoking the womxn and honoring the many lives lost while crossing the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

Astral Sea has been used internationally in several performances including in response to Christoph Buchel's *Barca Nostra* at the 2019 Venice Biennale. My performance was to protest the Biennale and Buchel for putting Black death on display as an object. For Park Avenue Armory's *100 Years | 100 Women*, I created *Astral Sea II* in collaboration with musician Cecily Alexa Bumbray. The performance took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests in Washington, D.C. in front of the US Capitol and Monument, and reflected on the 19th Amendment, intersectional feminism, the US-Mexican border and the Black womxn who have been at the frontline of major societal shifts, movements, and revolutions in this country and internationally, yet who have not been recognized as Visionaries.



Fig. 1 Tsedaye Makonnen, *Aberash* | አበራሽ | *You Give Light*, 2018, performance & sculpture. Photographer: Joey Kennedy. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2 Tsedaye Makonnen, *Senait & Nahom* | ሰናይት ፡፡ እና ፡፡ ናሆም | *The Peacemaker & The Comforter*, 2019, sculpture. Photographer: Dawn Whitmore. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3 Tsedaye Makonnen, *Astral Sea I*, 2019, sculpture, textile, performance.
Photographer: Ashley Rosas. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4 Tsedaye Makonnen, *Astral Sea III: Buckingham Palace*, 2020, sculpture, textile, performance. Photographer: Adeyemi Michael. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5 Tsedaye Makonnen, *Astral Sea II*, 2020, sculpture, textile, performance. Photographer: Tirop Kituur. Courtesy of the artist.